

A Funerary Epigram for a Trans Woman (*Greek Anthology* 7.222)

⌒. Martiana

In the vast collection of epigrams that is the *Greek Anthology*, we can find a few pieces that deal with trans women, although scholars have largely been unwilling to acknowledge this transness (see the discussion below). I here translate one of the most beautiful of these poems, written by Philodemus of Gadara (1st century BCE), a funerary epigram about a woman called Trygonion (Τρυγόνιον) or ‘Little Turtledove’, who may or may not have been a real person.

Φιλοδήμου.

Ἐνθάδε τῆς τρυφερῆς μαλακὸν ῥέθος, ἐνθάδε κεῖται
Τρυγόνιον, σαβακῶν ἄνθεμα Σαλμακίδων,
ἥτις καλύβη καὶ δοῦμος ἐνέπρεπεν, ἧ φιλοπαίγμων
Στωμυλίη, Μήτηρ ἣν ἐφίλησε Θεῶν,
Ἡ μούνη στέρξασα τὰ Κύπριδος ἀμφὶ γυναικῶν
Ὅργια καὶ φίλτρων Λαίδος ἀψαμένη.
Φῦε κατὰ στήλης, ἱερὴ κόνι, τῇ φιλοβάκχῳ
Μὴ βᾶτον, ἀλλ’ ἀπαλὰς λευκοίων κάλυκας.

By Philodemus.

Here the femme’s soft body, here is laid
The Little Dove, the pride of the Salmacid dolls,¹
Whose room and company were famous, whose banter
Was playful, and whom the Gods’ Mother loved,²
She who only enjoyed the mysteries of Cypris³
With women, and who equalled the charms of Laïs.⁴
Now, let no bramble grow for this friend of Bacchus,⁵ o sacred dust
Around the tomb, but white violets’ tender flower-cups!

¹ Salmacis was a wellspring said to “feminize those who drink from it” (Strabo, *Geography* 14.2.16).

² Trans women would castrate themselves for the Mother-of-Gods, and many were devoted to her.

³ The mysteries of Cypris (i.e., Aphrodite) mean sexual intercourse.

⁴ A famously beautiful courtesan.

⁵ A “lover of wine”, but surely also of the god, Dionysus.

Discussion

When I have shared my translation of this poem with queer people, in text or in performance, it has consistently been received as a moving eulogy for a trans woman. Among scholars, on the other hand, Philodemus' epigram is at best considered an expression of "tolerant affection",⁶ as if the natural attitude towards a person like Trygonion were intolerance. Even in an article that critically investigates the use of disgust in ancient portrayals of trans women (lat. *gállī*), the author construes an unfathomably hostile reading:

Trygonion, who is described as a flower among the feeble effeminates, relates how she alone of the babbling band of half-men loved the orgies of Aphrodite and how her charms equaled those of Lais. The implicit idea of the formerly lascivious body of the *gallus* now rotting in his grave complements the ghastliness of the image.⁷

In fact, Philodemus does not describe Trygonion or her peers in such negative terms as "feeble", "babbling" or "lascivious", nor is the word "half-men" part of the transmitted text. The poem does not call her a *gállos*, never uses masculine gender for her, and makes no allusion to bodily decay. In short, it contains nothing ghastly except a consciousness of death, like all funerary writing. There is simply no sense of disgust in the poem, unless it is brought in by the reader.

Still, should we perhaps read the piece as a "[s]atirical parody of an inscription for a tomb",⁸ a "mock grave epigram",⁹ as other translators have it? No, since the reasoning behind this interpretation is only that "the poem makes far better sense as a mock lament for a castrato than as a maudlin epitaph for a real (i.e., biological) woman."¹⁰ In other words, when scholars realized that the poem was about a trans rather than a cis woman,¹¹ they concluded that it must *therefore* somehow be demeaning, even though the wording of the text is not:

It will become evident that this pretty but seemingly meaningless little poem is in reality overshadowed by all the lights of irony. What at first glance seems slightly sentimental, pleasant and rather conventional is actually a confidently drawn caricature, touching on the grotesque.¹²

Ridiculous. But so much in general terms; further errors will be addressed in the commentary.

⁶ Timothy P. Wiseman, *Catullus and His World: A Reappraisal*, Cambridge University Press 1985, p. 204.

⁷ Marika Rauhula, "Obscena Galli Praesentia: Dehumanizing Cybele's Eunuch-Priests through Disgust", in: Donald Lateiner & Dimos Spatharas (eds.), *The Ancient Emotion of Disgust*, Oxford University Press 2017, pp. 235–252, here p. 249.

⁸ Andrew S. F. Gow & Denys L. Page, *The Greek Anthology: The Garland of Philip and Some Contemporary Epigrams*, Cambridge University Press 1968, vol. 2, p. 396.

⁹ David Sider, *The Epigrams of Philodemus*, Oxford University Press 1997, p. 178.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 179.

¹¹ William R. Paton, "Anth. Pal. VII.222 (Philodemus)", in: *The Classical Review* 30.2 (March 1916), p. 48.

¹² Georg Luck, "Trygonions Grabschrift", in: *Philologus* 100 (1956), p. 271, my translation. To prove his argument, Luck does little more than assert that "the hieratic sensibility [...] is quite ironic here" (p. 285).

Commentary

Apart from punctuation and capitalization, my Greek text differs from that in D. Sider’s edition¹³ only in that I retain the manuscripts’ ἀμφὶ γυναικῶν in line 5 (see my note on that line below).

(1) **The femme’s soft ...** (τῆς τρυφερῆς μαλακὸν): more precisely, “the soft ... of the tender (woman)”, but since both words are used especially of women and gay men, especially bottoms, the translation “femme” seems appropriate here.

(2a) **The Little Dove** (Τρυγόνιον): a nickname, grammatically neuter like the German *Täubchen* of the same meaning, but derived from feminine τρυγών, ‘turtledove’ (a woman’s name as well as a common noun).

(2b) **Salmacid** (Σαλμακίδων): “It is held that a nymph by the name of Salmacis, daughter of Heaven and Earth, was the cause for the naming of the Halicarnassian wellspring of water as Salmacis; and that if someone drank from it, they would become soft (*mollesceret*) with the vice of shamelessness.”¹⁴ More precisely, the effect was supposed to be feminizing.¹⁵ Salmacis is best known today from the myth told by Ovid,¹⁶ summarized as follows by an ancient grammarian under the title *Salmacis and Hermaphroditus into One Body*:

“He also mentions Salmacis, the wellspring of Caria, by whose water those who touch it are disfigured, being turned to softness. After Mercury has had (a son) from Venus who is called Hermaphroditus for his double shape, and the Naïd Nymphs have raised him on Mount Ida, he leaves his home and comes to Caria. Here, seeing a wellspring with a very shaded site and clear water, he (no longer)¹⁷ continues his course. When he stays in the place for a longer time, Salmacis, one of the Naïds, falls in love with him after she spots his footprints while gathering flowers. Staying a little around Mount Nonacris,¹⁸ he is detained by the pleasantness of the water and the prayers of the Nymph. He dove in the wellspring and was at once caught in the embrace of the Naïd, and she did not let him go before he asked of her to pass into a single form (with her). So, forgiveness being granted,¹⁹ Hermaphroditus, after he became aware that he had become neither man nor woman, asked of his parents that he not be infamous alone, and so, whoever touches the water of her wellspring should become soft just like him.”²⁰

¹³ Cf. footnote 9 above.

¹⁴ Sextus Pompeius Festus, *On the Meaning of Words*, p. 329 (ed. Wallace M. Lindsay).

¹⁵ See footnote 1 above.

¹⁶ Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 274–388.

¹⁷ Some addition like this seems necessary for the sense.

¹⁸ Mount Nonacris is in Greece, not Caria, so the text almost certainly requires emendation.

¹⁹ By Hermaphroditus to Salmacis, who is now united with him?

²⁰ Pseudo-Lactantius, *Narrations of Ovid’s Myths* 4.11 (ed. Hugo Magnus).

Note that the cramped and somewhat confused state of this translation reflects the Latin, as least it currently stands. However, new edition might yet produce a clearer text.

(2c) **dolls** (σαβακῶν): σαβακός²¹ is a rare synonym for σαθρός,²² which itself appears as a synonym or coordinate term of μαλακός, ‘bottom, fem(me)’,²³ and γάλλος, ‘trans woman’.²⁴ Ptolemy writes that certain “males are σαθροί and feminized in their souls, and some even hate their reproductive organs.”²⁵ In the present context, translations like “feeble”²⁶ or “nerveless”²⁷ therefore miss the point, and a synonym for ‘trans woman’ is more fitting. Admittedly, “dolls” does not have particularly relevant connotations, but I find it makes for an appropriate contrast with the elevated “Salmacid”.

(3a) **room** (καλύβη): perhaps rather “hut, cabin”, but I think “room” encompasses these meanings. It has been wrongly inferred that the reference must be to a sanctuary of Galli, as Trygonion herself has been assumed to be a Gallus, not only in the sense of a trans woman, but that of “an emasculated priest of Cybele”.²⁸ Yet the poem never identifies her as such (see the note on line 4), nor does the word καλύβη by itself have associations that would lead us to such a conclusion. Much seems to rest on the fact that there was a certain hut (καλύβη) on the Palatine hill in Rome, where there was also a temple of the Great Mother, and perhaps near it. But it is not an “attractive suggestion”²⁹ that this hut is the same as the καλύβη mentioned in our poem, since (a) mere proximity to a temple in a city crowded with buildings by no means warrants the conclusion that it “served as the club-house or common-room of her eunuch priests”,³⁰ (b) the word καλύβη does not call to mind Rome or the Palatine only because there was one hut there, and (c) as I said, nothing tells us that Trygonion held a priesthood of the Mother. In short, there is no plausible connection to be drawn here.

(3b) **company** (δοῦμος): as with καλύβη, it has been assumed that this word must have a religious meaning, and in this case with more justification, as most attestations of δοῦμος are found in dedicatory inscriptions, where it seems to have the meaning of a “sacred fellowship” (ἱερὰ

²¹ It is notable that Philodemus does not use a specifically masculine form; perhaps I should write *σαβακή.

²² Hesychius, *Lexicon* s.v. σαβακός.

²³ Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos* 3.15.10: “soft (μαλακοί) men and queers (σαθροί) emotionally disposed towards unnatural intercourses and women’s work”; also Musonius Rufus in John Stobaeus, *Anthology* 4.15a.18.

²⁴ *Gnomon of Idios Logos* 244.

²⁵ Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos* 2.3.48.

²⁶ D. Sider, p. 178.

²⁷ A. S. F. Gow & D. L. Page, vol. 1, p. 367.

²⁸ A. S. F. Gow & D. L. Page, vol. 2, p. 396.

²⁹ D. Sider, p. 182.

³⁰ Timothy P. Wiseman, “Philodemus 26. 3 G–P”, in: *The Classical Quarterly*, New Series 32.2 (1982), pp. 475–476, here p. 476.

συμβίωσις).³¹ However, if that were its exact meaning, the phrase “sacred δοῦμος”³² would seem gratuitous, and a more recently discovered dedication seems to require the more general sense “fellowship”.³³ This fits with a gloss in Hesychius, where the headword is transmitted as δοῦλος but should probably be emended to δοῦμος; it is explained as “the house (or ‘household’), or the gathering of women at it”.³⁴ This makes perfect sense here: Trygonion’s charm gave a reputation, not only to her home (καλύβη), but also to the companions who would gather there.

(4) **whom the Gods’ Mother loved** (Μήτηρ ἣν ἐφίλησε θεῶν): this does not mean that Trygonion was a priest of the Mother, or even that she was a devotee, although we may guess that she was. I am more inclined to understand this as another circumlocution for Trygonion’s transness, possibly but not necessarily hinting at self-castration.

(5) **only enjoyed the mysteries of Cypris with women** (μόνη στέρξασα τὰ Κύπριδος ἄμφι γυναικῶν): this fairly straightforward passage has strangely confounded scholars. Admittedly, multiple interpretations are possible, but that is not a textual problem: we can understand μόνη either to mean that Trygonion “only” or that she “especially” had sex ἄμφι γυναικῶν, and we can form our own ideas of what the latter phrase means: “around women, for the sake of women”? In any case, the apparent meaning is that she is a lesbian.

Earlier commentators apparently did not see this possibility. One had difficulty imagining “how the emasculated *Gallus* can be described as” celebrating the mysteries of Aphrodite at all, except by reference to Martial, *Epigrams* 3.81, where a Gallus is insulted for performing cunnilingus.³⁵ Another found it “hard to understand what *orgia* ‘for the sake of women’ could mean: one either partakes in these activities or not; they are not done for anybody’s sake.”³⁶ One has the impression he was so uncomfortable with the sexual meaning that he actually wanted to understand these “mysteries” as ordinary rituals, thus wilfully missing the point.

From this place of bewilderment or incomprehension, editors have unnecessarily adopted different conjectural readings for ἄμφι γυναικῶν, namely ἡμιγυναίκων (‘half-women’), ἀμφιγυναίκων (‘women on both sides’), and ἀντιγυναίκων (‘substitute women’),³⁷ so as to give the meaning “the half-women’s mysteries of Cypris”, etc. I will not address these emendations individually, except to

³¹ *Corpus Inscriptionum Graecarum* 3438, as cited by D. Sider, p. 183.

³² *Corpus Inscriptionum Graecarum* 3439, as cited *ibid*.

³³ Günter Neumann, “Ein neuer Beleg für ΔΟΥΜΟΣ”, in: *Historical Linguistics* 115.1 (2002), pp. 57–58.

³⁴ This is cited by D. Sider, p. 183 as “show[ing] how the word can refer both to the material structure and to the people assembled”, but he does not acknowledge that it calls into question his interpretation of δοῦμος as “Holy Assembly” (p. 182).

³⁵ A. S. F. Gow & D. L. Page, vol. 2, p. 396.

³⁶ D. Sider, p. 185. Even more bluntly, W. R. Paton, p. 48: “In line 5 ἄμφι γυναικῶν means nothing”.

³⁷ All originating with W. R. Paton, p. 48.

note that the justification for ἀμφιγυναίκων is especially tortured,³⁸ but only make one comment: these changes to the text all force a denial of womanhood into a poem that is consistently sensitive to transfemininity.³⁹ Such a violent rewriting is not justified by a difficult preposition, which arguably does not represent a textual problem at all.

(7) **this friend of Bacchus** (τῇ φιλοβάκχῳ): metonymically, this can mean a “lover of wine”, but the god Bacchus or Dionysus himself is surely also meant, just as “Cypris” refers both to intercourse and to the goddess Aphrodite herself.

Conclusion

An entire book could (and perhaps should) be written about how this and other trans epigrams in the *Greek Anthology* have been treated by editors, commentators, and translators; the present piece could only address so many problems and misconceptions. In a more expansive discussion, it would also be possible to give more space to plausible alternative readings and interpretations, whereas I have argued mostly for the accuracy of my own translation. I do think it is a good translation, but I cannot credit this to talent or insight, but only to my commitment to an ethical philology, that is, a method of reading and interpreting in which I strive to treat all subjects and all possible readers as my equals—even impossible readers:

How about the living creatures on Mars, Saturn, Jupiter, Uranus, Neptune? [...] I wish to love them, [although] they are so far off I have no way to do it.⁴⁰

Manifestly, classical scholarship has long disregarded trans women as possible readers, and shown no concern for the dignity of queer subjects. Philodemus, on the other hand, imbued the remembrance of Trygonion with beauty and nobility, and this is evident to any reader who does not expect and want him to humiliate her. Not that ancient writers are responsive to our wishes—but we should be ready to find that they do not always share our crueller impulses, that they sometimes allow freedom where we have learned to desire repression. Such moments are when we should least wish to intervene in the text (e.g., changing “women” into “half-women”), to rewrite it in translation (from “she” to “he”), or to force open-ended descriptions into a narrow frame of reference (like making Trygonion into a “eunuch priest”, or restricting her to a single hill in the city of Rome).

³⁸ D. Sider, p. 185.

³⁹ Nor is it clear that the reference is only to trans women, and excludes cis women, or vice versa.

⁴⁰ Laurence G. Thompson (translator), *Ta Tung Shu. The One-World Philosophy of K'ang Yu-Wei*, George Allen & Unwin Ltd 1958, p. 66. I omit a parenthetical “jen” (i.e., 仁 *rén*) after “love”.